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Food— The Achilles Heel of Communism

In its monumental failure to feed the people it enslaves lies the core weakness of the communist system

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A few years ago Premier Khrushchev concluded a speech eulogizing Maj. Yuri Gagarin, the first man to orbit our planet, with an impassioned appeal for improved farm production. He called upon the peasants to match the astronaut's achievement in the sky with feats of diligence on earth.

Unwittingly he thus pointed up a deep-running irony of communism —that a system able to produce space spectaculars has failed dismally in the basic human enterprise of feeding its people.

The communist police-state can usually regiment its workers in factories and mines, but not the tillers of the soil. Because of an ingrained desire to own the land they work, farmers resist its "socialization," often to the death. When forced to give their land to the state, they invariably resort to slow-down, negligent cultivation, pilfering of crops and other forms of passive resistance. Russia was once among the world's leading grain exporters. Today, after 35 years of collectivization, she is among the largest grain *importers*—witness this year's huge Soviet purchases of cereals and other farm products in the free world, including the United States.

This is the fateful flaw in communism, its Achilles heel, wherever Red rule has been imposed. From Red China to Red Cuba, the hallmarks of communist "planning" have been rationing, food queues, acute shortages, sometimes actual famine. The only exceptions today are Yugoslavia and Poland, both of which, after disastrous years under coerced collectivization, returned the farms to peasant families for private operation. When their peasants were given the right to leave the collectives, the exodus was instantaneous, joyous and almost unanimous. Poland, for other reasons, still contends with food shortage, but the problem is not nearly as acute as in other Iron Curtain countries.

This makes a travesty of the claim that communism is a superior economic system offering a shortcut to progress. The claim, fostered by propaganda and by Soviet achievements in space, is especially potent in backward, underfed nations. The importance of making the truth known is therefore self-evident.

Pie-in-the-sky promises, never met, ever postponed, have become standard. Russia's first Five Year Plan after the war (1946-1950) pledged to "create an abundance of consumer goods," especially foodstuffs. In 1953, the ruling party's Central Committee promised: "In the next two or three years, our country will have an abundance of meat, milk, butter, eggs and other livestock products." In 1957, Khrushchev bragged that by 1961 the Soviets would catch up with America—"We'll see who eats better!" he exclaimed. In 1962, he was still boasting that Soviet agriculture would "overtake the United States" by 1970. Meanwhile, a few months later, the price of meat was raised a stunning 30 percent and butter 25 percent in order to limit consumption, provoking riots in several cities; Khrushchev had gone shopping for food in the capitalist world; and the food lines in the provinces had grown longer.

Khrushchev himself has contributed to Soviet agricultural woes. Most experts agree that his two greatest failures have been his extravagant love affair with corn and his "Virgin Lands" development program. Because of Khrushchev's zeal to harvest more corn, farm officials blindly ordered that it be planted on thousands of acres of land better suited to other crops—even on land where corn froze before it could ripen, and where it was so dry that ears would not form.

Khrushchev's Virgin Lands program was an attempt to grow wheat on marginal land previously uncultivated in the vast open spaces of Siberia. But great dust storms have been sweeping these areas, leaving a wasteland reminiscent of our own Dust Bowl 30 years ago.

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